

Message

From: Fong, Tera [Fong.Tera@epa.gov]
Sent: 11/5/2021 1:26:54 PM
To: Cannon, Phillippa [Cannon.Phillippa@epa.gov]; Newton, Cheryl [Newton.Cheryl@epa.gov]; Kelley, Jeff [kelley.jeff@epa.gov]; Kaplan, Robert [kaplan.robert@epa.gov]; Harris, Michael [harris.michael@epa.gov]; Durno, Mark [durno.mark@epa.gov]; Cisar, Elizabeth [Cisar.Elizabeth@epa.gov]; Wadlington, Christina [Wadlington.Christina@epa.gov]; Walts, Alan [walts.alan@epa.gov]; Dollhopf, Ralph [Dollhopf.Ralph@epa.gov]; Kimble, Jeffrey [kimble.jeffrey@epa.gov]
Subject: RE: Benton Harbor newsclips 11/05/21

Sharing one more with a photo from the resource fair.

https://www.heraldpalladium.com/communities/benton-harbor/benton-harbor-residents-seek-information-on-lead-at-resource-fair/article_e47d3292-cecc-5b93-be02-d478812c4bda.html

I'm scheduled to talk to the Herald Palladium later this morning.

From: Cannon, Phillippa <Cannon.Phillippa@epa.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 5, 2021 8:21 AM
To: Newton, Cheryl <Newton.Cheryl@epa.gov>; Kelley, Jeff <kelley.jeff@epa.gov>; Kaplan, Robert <kaplan.robert@epa.gov>; Harris, Michael <harris.michael@epa.gov>; Durno, Mark <durno.mark@epa.gov>; Fong, Tera <Fong.Tera@epa.gov>; Cisar, Elizabeth <Cisar.Elizabeth@epa.gov>; Wadlington, Christina <Wadlington.Christina@epa.gov>; Walts, Alan <walts.alan@epa.gov>; Dollhopf, Ralph <Dollhopf.Ralph@epa.gov>; Kimble, Jeffrey <kimble.jeffrey@epa.gov>
Subject: FW: Benton Harbor newsclips 11/05/21

From: Arcaute, Francisco <Arcaute.Francisco@epa.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 5, 2021 7:09 AM
To: Rowan, Anne <rowan.anne@epa.gov>; Gillespie, Taylor <Gillespie.Taylor@epa.gov>; Cannon, Phillippa <Cannon.Phillippa@epa.gov>; Singer, Joshua <Singer.Joshua@epa.gov>; Pope, Janet <Pope.Janet@epa.gov>; Fong, Tera <Fong.Tera@epa.gov>; Walts, Alan <walts.alan@epa.gov>; Russell, Diane <russell.diane@epa.gov>
Subject: Benton Harbor newsclips 11/05/21

Benton Harbor newsclips 11/05/21

<https://apnews.com/article/business-lifestyle-environment-and-nature-michigan-poverty-12586348a94d5d57de7de6e15df23421>

Michigan city on edge as lead water crisis persists

By MICHAEL PHILLIS
November 4, 2021 GMT

BENTON HARBOR, Mich. (AP) — Shortly after sunrise on a recent Saturday in Benton Harbor, Michigan, residents began lining up for free bottled water so they could drink and cook without fear of the high levels of lead in the city's tap water.

Free water distribution sites are a fixture of life in the majority Black city in the southwestern corner of Michigan, where almost half of the nearly 10,000 residents live below the poverty line. For three years, tests of its public water system revealed elevated levels of lead.

Waiting for free bottled water is time consuming and some residents wonder why, in a state that recently dealt with the Flint water crisis, the problem wasn't fixed sooner.

"It's tiresome," said Rhonda Nelson, waiting in line at a site run by the Boys & Girls Clubs of Benton Harbor.

"I understand what Flint was going through, I really do," she said.

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has promised to spend millions of dollars to replace the city's lead service lines within 18 months – a blistering pace for a process that often takes decades. For now, residents have been warned not to cook, drink or make baby formula with tap water.

Residents worry what the elevated lead levels mean for their families' health. The problem is also inconvenient and stressful. Drivers line up at water distribution sites early, pulling people away from jobs and family. Bottled water must be used carefully so it doesn't run out. Even waiting in line has consequences – idling uses gas that drivers have to pay to replenish more often.

Waiting in line, LaKeena Crawford worried about the consequences for her 8-year-old daughter, who she has seen try to turn on the water.

"I'm like, 'No!'" Crawford said, adding that she wants her daughter to understand that lead in water is dangerous. But, "I don't want to frighten her too much."

Lead exposure can slow cognitive development, especially in young children, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and federal officials say no amount of lead in drinking water is considered safe for their consumption. In recent months, activists have pushed for more immediate, aggressive action, and the state has ramped up its response.

Some wonder whether the problem would have been handled more quickly if Benton Harbor's residents looked more like those in neighboring St. Joseph, who are predominantly white.

"Sometimes you just have to call out racism, and that's what it feels like," said Ambie Bell, helping distribute water to residents.

There are millions of aging underground lead lines connecting buildings to water mains across the country, mostly in the Midwest but also scattered across other states like New Jersey and Massachusetts. The old pipes can become an urgent public health risk. Newark, New Jersey, saw prolonged lead water problems that led to the rapid replacement of thousands of lead pipes. High test results in Clarksburg, West Virginia, raised alarm bells earlier this year. The word Flint is now synonymous with lead water problems.

Digging up and replacing lead service lines is costly, stressing tight local budgets. The infrastructure and reconciliation bills pending in Congress include billions to address lead line replacement that activists say could make a significant difference.

The lead water problem in Flint started when that city switched its water source to the Flint River as a temporary cost-saving move without proper treatment, corroding its lead pipes. But Benton Harbor's

water source, Lake Michigan, is considered safe and many other places get their water there, City Manager Ellis Mitchell said.

“Our problem is clearly our own infrastructure,” he said.

On Tuesday, the Environmental Protection Agency identified a range of violations at Benton Harbor’s water facility. The federal inspection found problems so bad that the city needs to consider forfeiting ownership, the EPA said.

“The people of Benton Harbor have suffered for too long,” EPA Administrator Michael Regan said in a statement.

Water systems occasionally produce high test results, but in Benton Harbor, authorities haven’t been able to bring them down. The long-term fix involves replacing the roughly 2,400 pipes that may contain lead, state officials said.

The city also lacks resources. Prior governors installed emergency managers with broad decision-making authority that reduced staffing, and the city’s population has declined, shrinking its tax base.

“This results in a knock-on effect of reduced technical, managerial and financial capability at the water plant due to underinvestment in staff, equipment and training,” said Scott Dean, a spokesman with the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy.

After Flint’s water crisis, Michigan tightened requirements for lead in drinking water in 2018, boasting it had passed the nation’s most protective law. It imposed more stringent requirements for testing water for lead and mandated that old lead service lines be replaced.

Environmental groups and local activists filed a petition over Benton Harbor in September with the EPA, urging aggressive action. The Rev. Edward Pinkney, an activist whose name is on the petition, said if they hadn’t filed, an aggressive official response may have taken even longer.

“We couldn’t take it anymore,” Pinkney said.

The Michigan House of Representatives oversight committee held a hearing last month on Benton Harbor. Republican Committee Chair Steven Johnson questioned why the recent state response to the city’s lead crisis feels like it has gone “from zero to 100 miles per hour” even though the problem has persisted for years.

Michigan officials say they have taken the problem seriously, and on Thursday, Gov. Whitmer issued a directive calling for a review of current drinking water rules, including examining ways to reduce lead levels and ensure communities fully inform the public when there are problems.

Earlier efforts have included offering Benton Harbor residents filters to reduce the amount of lead in drinking water, though their effectiveness is being reviewed, and corrosion control to cut the amount of lead from pipes. While lead sampling results overall are still too high, the proportion of high readings has decreased, officials said.

Inspectors, however, have knocked the city for failing to notify water customers in their water bills about the problem over a recent year-long period.

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha is a pediatrician and professor at Michigan State University who raised early alarms about Flint. She gets questions from parents about whether some developmental problem could be linked to lead in the water. It's extremely difficult, however, to draw a direct link between an individual's health problem and lead in the water.

"That's why lead poisoning has evaded diagnosis, treatment and prevention for so long," she said, adding that exposure to lead isn't safe for children and it's too soon to predict what the long-term impact may be. Lead levels can vary by household and individuals can respond differently to exposure. The impact can depend on other factors like poverty, too, making it especially important to address the issue in city's like Benton Harbor, she said.

Marc A. Edwards, a Virginia Tech professor focused on water treatment, said the attention on Benton Harbor highlights a national problem of cities struggling with elevated lead levels. He said lead water crises like Flint degrade public trust in official management of water systems.

Sylvester Bownes, who wears a prosthetic on his right leg, said he has consumed bottled water for years because he doesn't trust Benton Harbor's water.

Pushing a makeshift cart filled with several cases of bottled water a half-mile to his home, he said a water main rupture had temporarily shut off the public water supply, so with no running water, he not only needed bottled water for drinking, but water for basic needs like filling his toilets.

"Water is everything," Bownes said. "It's like gold."

Residents who are homebound can call a help line to get water delivered, but Bownes said the process takes too long and isn't reliable. State officials said hundreds of people have been added to a list for weekly deliveries. If there are problems, residents should report them, they said.

Mitchell, the city manager, said last month that customers are being billed for water that authorities say can still be used for tasks like laundry and washing dishes. He said the city is looking into whether "there's some sort of relief we can get on that" for residents.

At the Boys & Girls Club water giveaway volunteers handed out nearly 2,200 cases by noon.

Nelson, who has 12- and 14-year-old daughters and a 5-year-old son, said preparing dinner can take 15 to 20 water bottles. "Hopefully they get it fixed soon," she said.

Greg Johnson, who was the first to pull up at about 8:15 a.m., said he arrived early so his family's supplies would be replenished for his daughters, ages 8 and 11.

"It takes two cases in the morning to get them ready for school," he said. "They've got to get washed up and all that. It's kinda hectic."

<https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2021/11/whitmer-administration-puts-benton-harbor-water-records-trove-online.html>

Whitmer administration puts Benton Harbor water records trove online

By [Garret Ellison | gellison@mlive.com](#)

LANSING, MI — The Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) has [posted 11,000 pages of documents](#) related to the Benton Harbor water crisis online in response to public records requests and a Republican legislative oversight probe.

The records were posted Nov. 3 and more pertaining to the southwest Michigan city's ongoing water crisis will appear periodically, according to a 9-page letter to Sen. Ed McBroom, R-Vulcan, [who requested the records on Oct. 18](#).

The records are posted under the banner of the state's Office of the Clean Water Public Advocate within EGLE.

"I hope we will take advantage of this opportunity to identify changes to state policy, agency programs and procedures, and funding approaches that will accelerate Michigan's progress statewide in reducing drinking water lead exposure risk," [wrote](#) EGLE director Liesl Clark.

In the letter, Clark said "Michigan must more fully acknowledge and address" the challenge of lead in drinking water and noted that efforts by state and local entities to inform Benton Harbor residents about lead results bear improvement.

The letter outlines legal requirements for notifying the public and officials about exceedances of the federal action level and the state's efforts at outreach [since 2018](#), when city drinking water tests first began showing elevated lead results.

"Despite this significant communication over the past three years, however, I know firsthand from recent visits with residents at water distribution sites and other venues that the desired information has not fully reached and connected with many Benton Harbor residents," Clark wrote. "This gap should serve as an important point of reflection and discussion for officials and stakeholders at all levels of government."

The document disclosure follows an escalation in federal involvement in Benton Harbor. On Tuesday, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) [ordered the city to fix its troubled water system](#).

The actions come a month after state officials urged residents to [begin drinking bottled water](#) due to chronic problems with lead, a potent neurotoxin, in the municipal supply.

The EPA action comes amid high profile political negotiations over the size and scope of a \$1.75 trillion national infrastructure bill pushed by President Joe Biden that's expected to include substantial funding for replacing lead service lines around the country.

EGLE issued a separate but related legal violation notice to Benton Harbor on Tuesday, directing the city to survey the conditions of its water distribution system.

The state says the city's water treatment plant deficiencies are "part of a legacy of decades of disinvestment in the city's century-old water system, amplified by the myriad challenges of an environmental justice community with shrinking population served by a water system designed for twice the customers and twice the rate base."

Benton Harbor's lead levels have remained elevated in each consecutive testing round over the past three years. Individual homes have shown extremely high levels this year, including tests at 889, 605, 469, 109 and 107-ppb.

Lead is a potent neurotoxin that experts say has no safe level of exposure. High amounts can cause brain and nervous system damage, slowed growth and development, learning and behavior problems and hearing and speech problems. Exposure has also been tied to lower IQ, decreased attention span and performance among schoolchildren.

A petition filed with the EPA in September by a group of environmental and public health advocates sought a federal intervention in the city, which was under state-appointed emergency financial management from 2010 to 2016.

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services says it has delivered upwards of 124,000 cases of bottled water since Oct. 6, when it urged residents to switch to bottled water "out of an abundance of caution." The agency is holding a "water resource fair" on Thursday, Nov. 4 to educate residents about the health impacts of lead and share resources available to help reduce or eliminate lead from their homes.

The state estimates it will cost \$30 million to replace the city's network of aged lead lines, which Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has pledged to do by April 2023.

Whitmer, who made campaign promises to improve the state's drinking water while running for governor in 2018, faces political pressure and an oversight probe from Republicans who accuse her administration of failing to address the city's lead problems. The governor has also faced criticism from local advocates in Benton Harbor who say the situation did not receive an urgent response until they petitioned for help.

The Benton Harbor crisis has put renewed attention on other Michigan water systems, notably Hamtramck, where improvements in tap sampling procedures following the Flint water crisis are finding higher levels of lead that regulators say would have previously gone unnoticed.

A similar document dump occurred in February 2016 during the escalating Flint water crisis, when former Gov. Rick Snyder's administration posted thousands of pages of emails, internal communications and other records online.

<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2021/11/04/whitmer-issues-drinking-water-safety-plan-benton-harbor-docs-released/6287285001/>

Whitmer issues drinking water safety plan as agency releases Benton Harbor docs

Beth LeBlanc

The Detroit News

Lansing — Gov. Gretchen Whitmer issued a directive Thursday to address drinking water safety the same day her environmental department disclosed 11,000 documents related to the Benton Harbor lead crisis.

Whitmer's directive requires the Michigan departments of Health and Human Services and Environment, Great Lakes and Energy to review existing law to determine what reforms are necessary to strengthen drinking water protections.

The review must include the consideration of resources needed for compliance with state requirements as well as opportunities to improve education and engagement in a community affected by lead in drinking water.

The review must also include an exploration of ways to reduce lead and other contaminants in drinking water as well as state data collection practices. Lastly, the review should look at regional planning opportunities for water sources, treatment and delivery.

"Our top priority here remains guaranteeing safe drinking water for every Michigander, no matter who they are or where they live," Whitmer said in a statement. "We will not rest until every community has safe drinking water and every parent feels confident to give their kid a glass of water."

The directive came a day after EGLE Director Liesl Clark told Senate Oversight Chairman Ed McBroom in a letter that a thorough review of the state's response in Benton Harbor was "necessary" and would help the state moving forward.

She said the state took a range of actions over three years to inform Benton Harbor residents of lead exceedances in their drinking water, but noted the city also was responsible for some of those notifications.

Additionally, Clark wrote, "given that many residents were not fully reached and engaged by those efforts, we should consider potential improvements to our whole-of-government approach to communications." The suggestion mirrors the directive Whitmer issued Thursday.

Clark also wrote that Benton Harbor's situation is "part and parcel of a statewide lead drinking water challenge" and better strategies should be developed to ensure a broad, rapid, comprehensive approach to lead exceedances.

On Sept. 9, a petition was filed by Benton Harbor residents and community water advocates with the federal Environmental Protection Agency, asking the agency to intervene because of three years of high lead levels.

Within three weeks, the state started delivering free bottled water in Benton Harbor, a majority Black city whose drinking water has been found to have elevated lead levels for three consecutive years.

In an Oct. 6 statement, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services said the measures were being taken "out of an abundance of caution" and Benton Harbor residents were encouraged to use bottled water for cooking, drinking, brushing teeth, rinsing foods and mixing powdered infant formula.

On Oct. 14, Whitmer signed an executive directive implementing an "all-hands-on-deck" approach to replace 100% of the lead service lines in the city within 18 months. Her administration had previously committed to getting the lines out in five years.

https://www.heraldpalladium.com/communities/benton_harbor/second-recall-petition-filed-against-benton-harbor-mayor/article_501de318-5bf7-59d7-8142-2f65fa704cf5.html

Second recall petition filed against Benton Harbor mayor

Petition cites Muhammad's support of raising water rates

By JULIANA KNOT HP Staff Writer

Nov 3, 2021

BENTON HARBOR — Just hours after his earlier petition was denied, a Benton Harbor resident filed a second recall petition against Mayor Marcus Muhammad.

According to a county clerk employee, Quacy Roberts filed a petition to recall the mayor at 11:53 a.m. on Monday. The clarity hearing, which was where his earlier petition was denied, was at 9:30 a.m. that same day.

The most recent petition states Muhammad should be recalled, "For voting to increas (sic) the resident's (sic) of Benton Harbor water rate."

The Berrien County Election Commission is scheduled to meet for a clarity hearing at 9:30 a.m. on Nov. 17, according to a county employee.

The commission voted to deny the prior petition for inaccurate language. Roberts told The Herald-Palladium he planned to resubmit a petition, possibly that same day.

"For failing to tell the residents of Benton Harbor that the water was contaminated with lead," Roberts' prior recall petition stated.

In Roberts' opening statement, he acknowledged the city had said there was lead present in residents' water, but said they needed to use the words "contamination" or "contaminated with lead."

Muhammad presented several documents to the court, including city-published advisories and newspaper articles. The advisories were sent to residents and posted at city hall. One resident confirmed during public comment she had received the water advisory.

Muhammad did not respond for comment on Wednesday.

Commissioners voted to raise Benton Harbor's water rates in May 2020, over a five-year period. The hike was aimed to plug a \$900,000 shortfall and would result in a \$30 increase on average at the end of the five-year period.

At the time, the city was negotiating with the state to qualify for almost \$15 million in grants and low-interest loans for a project that was recently completed in the city. Along with fixing several streets, the work replaced 150 lead service lines and repaired the city's water tower.

The state at the time was requiring the city generate another \$1.3 million annually for the water system to cover operating costs and the proposed debt before the grants and loans would be awarded.

Commissioners ended up approving a financial package that raised sewer and water rates between 8 to 10 percent and used \$700,000 annually from the city income tax money.

The two recall petitions have come at a time while the city has been in the national spotlight for more than a month over its lead service lines.

<https://www.michiganradio.org/environment-climate-change/2021-11-04/mayor-says-benton-harbor-will-need-more-support-from-state-to-fix-water-system>

Mayor says Benton Harbor will need more support from state to fix water system

Michigan Radio | By Dustin Dwyer

Published November 4, 2021 at 5:25 PM EDT

Bottled water is available for the residents of Benton Harbor. For a list of distribution sites and times, go [here](#), or call 2-1-1.

The mayor of Benton Harbor is calling for more federal and state support to improve the city's water system, after regulators found a number of problems.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) both ordered Benton Harbor to make fixes to its water system in separate reports released this week. The regulators inspected the city's water system in September and October after yet another round of tests showed elevated levels of lead in Benton Harbor's drinking water. Tests have repeatedly shown high levels of lead there going back to 2018.

The federal and state regulators said they found dozens of deficiencies in the water system that need to be fixed.

"The report from EPA is, you know, blaming the victim, which is the classic conclusion of environmental racism in America," says Marcus Muhammad, Benton Harbor's mayor. "Because if you're going to diagnose the problem, but not come with solutions and funding, then your condemnation and your recommendation is a symbol without substance." Muhammad says many of the problems in the water system were created under the city's first emergency manager, who was appointed by the state. Muhammad says the emergency manager tried to cut costs by eliminating staff in the water department.

"The report from EPA is ... blaming the victim, which is the classic conclusion of environmental racism in America."

Marcus Muhammad, Mayor of Benton Harbor

Now, he says, the state is stepping in once again, to order the water department to fix its deficiencies.

"But the damage and the wreckage had already been done and dealt by the left hand of the state," Muhammad says.

EGLE's inspection report found crumbling concrete, spilled chemicals and inconsistent record-keeping at Benton Harbor's water plant. The report ultimately concluded the city lacks the technical, managerial and financial capacity to support its water system. The city has been ordered to make improvements within 120 days.

An EGLE spokesperson said the order was not intended as a "punitive exercise," but instead was meant to highlight the needs of the system, so that different organizations could come together to solve them. But the most pressing issue is still the lead contamination. The state of Michigan has been offering bottled water to residents at pickup sites throughout the city. On Thursday, the state offered a resource fair to connect residents with other forms of support.

The state also budgeted \$10 million to replace lead pipes in the city in its 2022 budget, and helped more than \$8 million for the project. Governor Whitmer says she wants all lead pipes in Benton Harbor to be replaced within 18 months, and she's requested another \$11.4 million from the state legislature to finish the job.

Muhammad says, after a slow start in 2018, that work is now accelerating in the city. He says he expects up to 100 lead pipes in Benton Harbor will be replaced before this winter.

<https://www.wndu.com/2021/11/05/health-officials-host-resource-fair-benton-harbor/>
Health officials host resource fair in Benton Harbor

By [Monica Murphy](#)

Published: Nov. 4, 2021 at 10:50 PM CDT| Updated: 8 hours ago

BENTON HARBOR, Mich. (WNDU) - Expanding services and improving peoples' quality of life.

With the ongoing water crisis in Benton Harbor, health officials hosted a resource fair on Friday.

Benton Harbor has had a lead problem for quite some time now.

The city recently declared a state of emergency on its ongoing water crisis.

This was an opportunity for residents to ask questions and share their concerns.

"It's been extremely tough. One thing about it though is that this community really bans together. You can't ever count us out. Failure is never an option. We always find a way to come together. Always find a way to support one another. This is the way to do that," Superintendent of Benton Harbor Area Schools Andraé Townsel.

Residents learned about the health effects of lead; how to get tested; and steps they can take to eliminate lead exposure in their homes.

"Our main objective, typically in public health, is to educate the public on the hazards. Trying to educate them to make good decisions to protect themselves and their exposure to environmental containments," said Gerald Tiernan with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Residents asked questions about water sampling and lead abatement services.

"It impacts me, impacts my family also, and impacts the community. It took three years just to get to this point, but I am glad we are in the process of getting things fixed," said Resident Miguel Clark.

"I thought it was important to come to the fair because a lot of my students, a lot of our families, are right here. Great opportunity to get some face-to-face time and continue to build some relationships and see what resources are available for our families," Townsel said.

State officials said they are working hard to remove lead service lines.

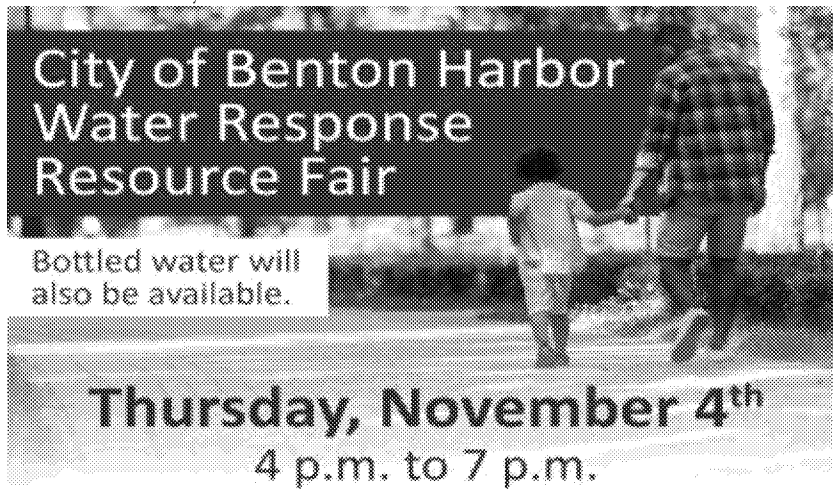
Meantime, they are asking you to drink bottled water.

There is a distribution site on Friday, Nov. 5 at Southwest Community Action Agency from 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.

There are also two distribution sites on Saturday Nov. 6 at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Benton Harbor from 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. and Harbor of Hope Seventh-Day Adventist Church from 4 p.m. - 6 p.m.

Resource Fair Tomorrow In Benton Harbor

November 3, 2021



A resource fair will be held for Benton Harbor residents Thursday so they can learn about places to turn for help as the city's water crisis continues. Benton Harbor Community Response Team Chair Princella Tobias tells WSJM News the fair will include information from the city of Benton Harbor, Berrien County Health Department, Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, and more.

"This is our first of many events that we will be having," Tobias said. "There will be over a dozen different participants to help the residents to have a better understanding of what's going on, to answer questions, and to listen."

Tobias says people have a lot of questions and there's plenty of confusion about the situation with lead in the water of some properties.

"Because this isn't something that just happened yesterday, and it's not something that we're going to fix tomorrow. So there are questions. This is part of the process, the process of educating our residents, the process of listening to them and being able to answer their questions."

Tobias says people will be able to get information on resources and also pick up bottled water at the fair. It will be held at the Benton Harbor Housing Commission building on Nate Wells Drive in Benton Harbor from 4 to 7 p.m. Tobias says she's glad the state and local organizations are coming together to address the crisis.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/11/04/another-water-crisis-looms-michigan-is-benton-harbor-next-flint/>

Opinion: Another water crisis looms in Michigan. Is Benton Harbor the next Flint?

A water tower in Benton Harbor, Mich., on Oct. 21. (Don Campbell/The Herald-Palladium/AP)

By Micheline Maynard
Contributing columnist

A century or more ago, Benton Harbor in southwest Michigan was known for its Lake Michigan port, its burgeoning fruit farms and, most important, its mineral baths.

Tourists flocked to establishments such as the Hotel Dwan to soak in, and sip, the water that was supposed to cure their ills. Now, Benton Harbor's water has another, grimmer reputation: for possible lead poisoning.

In October, the state accelerated efforts to replace, within 18 months, the city's lead service lines bringing water to Benton Harbor's roughly 9,700 residents — about 85 percent of whom are Black. The city is paying local volunteers and community groups to make home deliveries of bottled water. More than 100,000 cases have been delivered so far.

But community advocates and environmentalists accuse the state of taking far too long to act on a problem that was identified three years ago. What's happening in Benton Harbor, they say, too strongly echoes the neglect and official indifference that met the deadly water crisis in Flint, Mich., another city that is majority African American, only a few years ago.

How dangerous is Benton Harbor's water? In 2018, eight out of 30 homes tested exceeded the action level of 15 parts per billion for lead. The city was put under a state advisory and began issuing free water filters. Now the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is testing the reliability of those filters.

Only then will the extent of the problem come into focus, but lead may have been "poisoning hundreds, if not thousands, of residents for years," according to the Herald-Palladium, a plucky regional newspaper that has covered the story closely. Last week, reporter Juliana Knot spoke with Benton Harborites who said they were unaware of the danger until Oct. 7, when the state urged residents to drink bottled water.

ProPublica writer Anna Clark, who wrote a book on the Flint scandal, has a theory about why Michigan's leaders have been slow to address the small town's problem: The state has been beset by too many problems. "When you're in a place where everything's an emergency," she said, "nothing's an emergency, and it neutralizes everything."

Emergencies have buffeted much of Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's tenure since the Democrat took office in 2019, vowing to "fix the damn roads." Responding to the pandemic, Whitmer enacted extensive countermeasures in the spring of 2020, including one of the country's strictest stay-at-home orders.

That prompted vitriolic criticism from many in Michigan, and the following month armed protesters descended on the state Capitol. Some of the demonstrators participated in a plot to kidnap the governor that was broken up by the FBI.

Whitmer has tangled repeatedly with the Republican legislature over pandemic policy, as well as with anti-mask and anti-vaccine critics. Michigan is still shy of its bid to deliver a first dose to 70 percent of the population aged 16 and up, and it's one of a handful of states where cases continue rising.

All this is in addition to disastrous floods that swept Detroit in June, exposing the city's aging and vulnerable infrastructure.

You can see why Benton Harbor might have been off the state government's radar until lately, even if that is no excuse when people's health and well-being are at stake.

Still, the problem of lead in Americans' tap water is scandalously common. The Natural Resources Defense Council estimates that between 2018 and 2020, 56 percent of the U.S. population drank from water systems with detectable levels of lead.

Last month, Whitmer finally put Michigan's Black lieutenant governor, Garlin Gilchrist, in charge of a rescue plan for Benton Harbor, just as the national media began paying attention.

Earlier this year, Benton Harbor Mayor Marcus Muhammad said the city would have replaced its lead service lines three years ago, but didn't have the money. The state's 2022 budget includes \$10 million for replacing the lead water pipes, but Muhammad says it's a \$30 million job. More money may be forthcoming from the infrastructure bill tied up in Congress.

Whitmer, Gilchrist and other public officials are playing catch-up on this, but they still have an opportunity to demonstrate competence if they can make the 18-month replacement plan work.

If Whitmer is smart, she'll try to speed up even that ambitious target. She's up for reelection next fall, and potential Republican challenger James Craig, the former Detroit police chief, is already trying to tie her to the Benton Harbor mess.

Whitmer could counter the GOP by noting that Republican Rick Snyder, now fighting misdemeanor criminal charges for willful neglect of duty in the Flint scandal, was the governor when Benton Harbor's water troubles emerged.

But pointing out that she inherited the Benton Harbor mess won't be much help if the EPA report, expected soon, indicates that residents have been slowly poisoned for years. She just needs to fix the problem as quickly possible. Access to safe drinking water is one of the basic expectations of any American, in any town, large or small.

Francisco Arcaute, U.S. EPA

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